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Tourist destination image: advantages and limits of transferring face to face qualitative data collection onto the Internet

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ABSTRACT

The research presented investigates the advantages and limits of transferring a qualitative research approach (by interviews) onto the Internet. Internet offers the possibility to reproduce, to some extent, the interactive characteristics of face to face interviewing and these possibilities are tested in the research. A study on 200 consumers of ski resorts shows that while Internet opens up new dimensions to qualitative data collection, it cannot fully replace the presence of an interviewer. Results also indicate that image and word descriptions have different effects upon respondents' answers and that Internet provides some interesting scope to encourage creative response from consumers.

Keywords: *Destination image, qualitative research, internet, survey*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of tourism consumption, the understanding of destination image is a topic that has attracted a lot of attention from academics due to its central role in destination selection, its influence upon the formation of expectations and thereby upon satisfaction and future recommendations.

Image is a vast and fuzzy concept that has been defined as “an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual’s mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings and global impressions about an object or destination” (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999, p. 870). Tourist destination image is a composite mix of cultural, historical, economic and marketing influences which make it a complex and fascinating concept to study. Image is constituted not solely by the sum of tangible and intangible attributes; it also translates more holistic and global feelings about the destination (Crompton, 1979; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Gallarza *et al.* 2002).

In order to decompose and understand the components of a tourist destination image, qualitative research is a valuable approach since it allows for a much finer understanding of these various elements and the interrelationships between them. However it is a heavy and costly process involving extended data collection, lengthy transcription of discourses and extensive analysis. Furthermore, tourism destinations' promotion is endorsed by Destinations Marketing Organisations who often have to assume promotion towards multiple markets on a limited budget, it is therefore essential for them to identify alternative and cheaper ways to collect strategic consumer data. Online research has been the object of scrutiny for the last ten years as it provides a tremendous platform to collect data at a cheaper cost. However, online data collection carries some limits. The present study aims to investigate the scope of those limits and its benefits when attempting to transpose qualitative image analysis on the web.

LITERATURE

The web provides endless opportunities to collect large amount of data and to transpose data collection methods that had so far only been used in a face to face context to an online interface. Several studies have already looked into the advantages and limits of collecting data on the web. Cole (2009) indicates that the existing studies have been inconclusive since they often have varied research design and study topics that are too different to allow for constructive comparisons. Nevertheless, studies comparing web-based and paper surveys provide some useful information.

As expected several authors have shown that web-based surveys are cheaper to conduct than paper-based ones and data can be collected faster (Cobanoglu, Warde and Moreo, 2001; Schleyer and Forrest, 2000). The cost advantage is quite obvious since web-surveys save interviewers' costs. Another main advantage is its capacity to reach wider samples and international samples at the reduced cost. Another cost-reducing aspect is linked to the fact that the consumers enter themselves the data, (but it does not protect from consumers' errors in doing so), it does save the potential errors of data entry from an outsider and it tremendously reduces the cost of processing those data (Cobanoglu, Warde and Moreo, 2001; Schleyer and Forrest, 2000).

However, the response rate is not any higher on Internet; it can even be lower than with paper-based surveys. Cole (2009) conducted a study comparing web-based and paper-based surveys in a sample of the American Society of travel agents. His study shows that the response rate of web based survey was lower than for paper-based survey (but this limit can be counterbalanced by the larger sample sizes that can be reached on Internet). Researchers have also identified that the drop-out rate is lower for online respondents and that online respondents provide less incomplete data (Dolnicar, Laesser & Matus, 2009).

The other advantage of web-based surveys is the vast amount of possibilities that they offer, especially on an interactive basis. Different types of questionnaires and scales can be used; one can use pictures and/or videos that respondents activate; respondents can click and select a picture, add elements to it, etc. Moreover, web surveys allow for interesting interactions that mimic those that an individual would experience in a face to face interview. For instance, the answer given to a question can be used again as the text of the next question, etc.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this project is to identify the strengths and limits of using web surveys as an alternative to offline qualitative enquiries' techniques. A second objective is to test the impact of the survey format on the answers by comparing a survey based on pictures and another one based on words' descriptions.

A qualitative survey prototype was designed then conducted in the winter 2010 among four groups of 50 visitors each, in order to compare how consumers answered the surveys. Two types of surveys were conducted: one with images of the destination and one with words describing those images (but no pictures). Both of those surveys were conducted on face to face interviewing and on Internet. As a result, the sample was composed of 200 individuals: 50 were face to face with images, 50 were face to face with words, 50 were on Internet with images and 50 were on Internet with words.

The participants were presented with a series of 7 themes (they were free to choose one up to seven themes), each of which contained four pictures. For each theme selected, they then had to choose two pictures out of the four presented. The rationale behind this choice of four pictures was the fact that a theme like "authenticity" or "skiing" can mean varied things to different people, it was therefore important to leave ample choice for those interviewed. Finally, respondents were requested to write the slogan describing best a winter ski resorts. Varied criteria were used to measure the efficiency of the surveys' prototypes: the number of words collected, globally and per theme; the number of themes chosen, the richness of the vocabulary used, etc.

While it is acknowledged that a sample obtained on the web might be biased due to the uneven Internet access in an average population, this was not seen as a limit to the present study since skiing is an activity that is overrepresented in middle to upper classes and those classes have a widespread access to Internet.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study indicate that face to face interviewing encourages people to express themselves more. The presence of the interviewer, his/her questions and exchange with the respondents appears to encourage them to elaborate much more on the topic: not only do they choose more themes (on average three compared to two on Internet) but they also have a higher word count per chosen theme (130 against 78).

When looking at the effect of the survey format, globally images have a stronger impact upon respondents by amplification of the amount of responses obtained (130 words with images on face to face compared to 90 with words).

The results show that, when comparing face to face and Internet, it came out that respondents give significantly richer information with images than they do with word descriptions. On paper-based surveys, words equally lead to an inferior number of information collection than images.

On the contrary, when looking at the creation of slogans, face to face interviewing appears to constraint participants who give significantly shorter slogans (2,6 words) than on Internet (4,2 words).

The results show that no matter how efficient the technology can be, face to face interviewing remains a very efficient method of collecting data since the presence of an interviewer encourages respondents to express themselves more. While the results are not as powerful on Internet, this can be partially compensated by using images that will stimulate respondents' answers. However, the results also show that Internet can be particularly useful for stimulating the creative side of respondents which means that Internet might be more appropriate with specific types of surveys. More research needs to be conducted on this specific aspect as web surveying might be useful when it uses specific respondents' skills (for instance creating landscapes by clicking and dropping images, using some functions of Photoshop to create the "ideal" landscape, etc.).

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